British MP's Play Host

Richard L. Thomas'
London Notebook

TEA-TIME HEROES IN NEW DIPLOMACY

A NEW STUNT by an American travel agency has intrigued English newspapers. It is a package tour which includes in its attractions afternoon tea with a British MP on the terrace of the House of Commons—the sort of thing usually reserved for helpful constituents.

At first it was assumed that the members concerned were merely trying to add a little to their parliamentary salary, but that is not so.

We are assured that the whole business is voluntary. Members are not paid for entertaining tourists. It is designed to help Anglo-American goodwill and there is always a chance, so we are told, that if an influential customer happens to like the MP he or she might very easily ask him to visit the United States for a lecture tour—a most encouraging procedure.

Asked for names of members who are cooperating, the travel agency maintains a dignified silence. It seems that they do not wish to broadcast the quiet tea-time heroism of Britons crumpeting their way into the hearts of Americans.

Maybe we should be grateful that our members of Parliament are ranked with the undraped femininity of the Folies Bergere (the equivalent attraction in the French part of the European tour) and the thrill of meeting a Spanish toreador in the flesh (on the Spanish part of the same trip).

True enough, we are living in an age of gimmicks, but it must be the first time that members of the House of Commons have consented to be one. We could, of course, say a little unkindly that we have often suspected it.

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THE BRITISH are a sentimental people so perhaps it is not so surprising that 500,000 have put their names to a petition praying Parliament to grant additional copyright to the Gilbert and Sullivan operas.

The copyright on Sir Arthur Sullivan's music expired 10 years ago and the copyright on Sir William Gilbert's words will vanish under existing laws in 1961; and those who are asking an extension of copyright believe that unless this is granted productions of G & S will become so distorted as to be unrecognizable. Probably the most significant aspect of the business is that Miss Bridget D'Oyly Carte, the present holder of the copyright and inheritor of it from Rupert D'Oyly Carte, has not signed the petition. Whether because she is opposed to the idea, or merely because she is the vitally interested party is not known.

It is most unlikely that the petition will move Parliament unless, perchance, it opens up the manifest injustice of the copyright law. Obviously a writer is prejudiced on these matters, but it remarkable that the law does not disinherit any other property owner automatically and without compensation. If a bricklayer builds a house on a piece of land he has bought, that house remains the property of the bricklayer and his assigns for all time. He may leave it to someone in his will and the process is continued through time. There are houses in Britain which have been passed from father to son through centuries.

Yet the author who writes a book—surely equivalent to bricklaying for a writer? — may leave its copyright to someone on his death and the process may be continued, but only for 50 years. At the end of 50 years the property becomes common property. Anyone may use or abuse it and there is nothing to stop him.

The other injustice is that if the author dies young then the property rights are correspondingly reduced. Dead at 21 and the copyright on a book expires at a time when the person would otherwise have been 71 years of age. The author who lives to be 100 has at least an indirect interest in his property until he would be equivalent to 150 years of age. There is no manifest justice in the proceedings. From time to time various suggestions have been made for alterations to the copyright law and one of them was copyright should last for 125 years or 50 years after the death of the author whichever was the lesser. But the fundamental injustice of what amounts to the confiscation of property has been consistently avoided by legislators.

Against that certain early socialists advocated adjustment the other way. They argued that property should follow the copyright law so that 50 years after the death of the owner it should revert to the state. It was a tangible method of nationalization of the land without any immediate hardship to owners. It is doubtful, however, whether anyone would support the idea today.

The sentimental attachment to Gilbert and Sullivan comes through years of intimate association. It is sung in almost every school and by every amateur dramatic society and persistently toured by the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company and by virtue of its copyright it is only stylized performances which are authorized.

The only immediate effect of loss of copyright in 1961 will be the loss of a fabulously valuable property to Miss D'Oyly Carte, an immense saving to amateur dramatic societies for performing rights, and the probability that Gilbert and Sullivan will be introduced into the repertory of the Sadler's Wells Opera.

The main point is that if G & S is generally plagiarized it will cease to be G & S. The possibility of new singers and new productions could not be regarded by most people as an altogether undesirable result. The professional presentation has tended to be rather self-satisfied as a monopoly.

Reverting to the petition, however, there is no argument which may be adduced in favor of the "special case" of G & S which cannot with justice be applied to the copyright law in general.

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ONE WONDERS how long child minds will be allowed to operate in adult factories. Following a recent motor works strike one of the men affected, a lapsed trades unionist, has been "put in Coventry" by his fellow workers. No one speaks to him and he has to take his meals alone. Not so long ago we had the case of an engine driver, who was similarly treated, committing suicide.

The strength of character of the men who endure such sanctions is surely to be admired. The presumption is that they believe in individual liberty which at one time was the main reason for the formation of trades unions—to prevent equivalent and economic sanctions by tyrannical employers. Now the tide has turned and employers are being called upon to impose union discipline, by dismissing men of whom the union disapproves, under threat of a walk-out.

There is another case where the communist-dominated Electrical Trades Union has informed a motor manufacturer that unless a lapsed member is dismissed they will order a strike of members which would have the effect of putting some 10,000 men out of work.

Most employers have quite enough troubles of their own without having to help unions to discipline their members which, incidentally, they refuse to do.

Not all unions, of course, are so petty minded. Five local officials who authorized a strike in a steel works have been dismissed from office by the committee of the union. It is the severest penalty inflicted so far, and may well act as a salutary warning to like minded officials who abuse authority. The trouble comes when a body like the Electrical Trades Union is dominated by a committee whose majority is communist. Then the only discipline within the movement must come from the Trades Union Congress which, on the pretext that they are reluctant to intervene in the internal affairs of a member union, have shown that reticence, in some circumstances commendable, may be another name for spinelessness.

BRITAIN has had what may well turn out to be the mildest winter of the century. No one attributes it to the atom bomb. Winter sunshine and flowering of spring flora weeks ahead of normal have created pleasant conditions for all save the fuel merchants and the gas and electricity authorities which report a substantial drop in normal winter demands.

Apart from a severe spell in the north in December the weather has been generally mild. Sunshine has been well above normal and the grey overcast days of the English winter have been much less than was to be expected. Late in February and early in March week-end motoring to seaside holiday resorts was equal to summer average and in one case a motoring organization reported that it was heavier than a normal summer public holiday. Traffic jams in the country in March are a new development of the overcrowded English roads.

Long term forecasters are predicting a fine dry summer—which again would be unusual—but nothing would be more appreciated after the persistent deluge which ranked as summer last year.

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SOME OLD ENGLANDERS will realize with regret the march of progress when they hear that one of Britain's most famous aerodromes—one of the first to graduate to title of airport—will soon be no more. Croydon airport closes officially on April 30, but it will remain open unofficially until the end of September to allow for tidying up and removal of hangars and so on. So anyone with an urge to make a last landing at Croydon will have to hurry. At the moment it is used by one or two small charter companies and a flying club—scheduled airlines have by-passed it for years. Thirty years ago it was claimed to be one of the most modern airports in the world and the most important in this country.

Gatwick was built to accommodate Croydon's overflow, then Gatwick itself was closed down because of the creation of a brand new London Airport on the Great West Road. So rapid has been the growth of air travel that even London Airport is outgrowing itself and last year Gatwick, rebuilt and extended, was reopened to cope with the overflow. This year many European services will use Gatwick exclusively, but not all. The international airlines are not as enthusiastic as they had hoped. Main reason: passengers use London airport to make forward flights. They do not like changing airplanes. Least of all do they like changing airports—just another problem in the mounting traffic of the skies.

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A TRIFLE overwhelmed by the weight of complaints and acid newspaper criticism British Railways have at long last given way and are retiming some of their southern region trains to make lateness official. This year trains have been operating more or less regularly at anything from 20 minutes to an hour late on a 60-mile journey.

The last straw seems to have come when an irate passenger complained that he had caught a certain train every day and had been 20 minutes to half an hour late for work because the train never arrived on time. The boss had told him he was liable to get the sack. What were British Railways going to do about it? A bright public relations officer replied that the obvious thing to do was to catch an earlier train in which case he stood a good chance of arriving at the time the later train was supposed to.

The derision seemingly stunned the powers-that-be. New time tables are to be introduced allowing longer journey time until mid-June. By then, they say, their troubles will be over. The new electric trains will be operating—and we are promised that everything will be lovely. Some passengers wonder. A recent notice at Faversham regretted that there would be delays to steam trains owing to an electrical failure at Chatham!